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Essential Religiosity in Descartes and Locke

Catherine Wilson

Both Descartes and Locke were close to the evolving experimental and observational sciences of the seventeenth century, especially as these concerned the nature of human beings. Both were corpuscularian philosophers. Neither one was popular with mainstream Catholic and Protestant theologians. Although both invoked God at critical points in their philosophies, they were striving for a minimal, rational and reasonable, theology. The model of scientific practice and achievement presented to both an alternative to the rude and rough battles of the theologians, and the disunity of the churches enabled them to reject any handmaidenly role for philosophy vis-à-vis theology.¹ Locke declared himself rather an underlabourer to physicists, chemists, and physicians. Descartes thought of his accessory role in grander terms: as supplying conceptual foundations.

There, however, the similarities seem to end. Certain of the central doctrines of Locke's philosophy seem to have been formulated in deliberate opposition to Cartesianism. For Descartes, the laws of nature are simple and few, and at least the 'possible nature' of all phenomena can be and ought to be rationally accounted for by reference to them. Even without knowing exactly how things work, we have considerable power to improve medicine and mechanics with the help of physics (AT 9b, p. 327; CSM 1, p. 289). For Locke, the laws of nature are mostly unknown; we can understand very little of the material world and our ability to make improvements is accordingly limited. Our scientific ignorance is eloquently described in *Essay* IV. iii. 22–30. 'The things that, as far as our Observation reaches, we constantly find to proceed regularly, we may conclude, do act by a Law set them; but yet by a Law, that we know not: whereby, though Causes Work steadily, and Effects constantly flow from them, yet their *Connexions* and *Dependencies* being not discoverable in our Ideas, we can have but an experimental Knowledge of them' (E IV. iii. 29). For Descartes, morality is a matter of custom, convention, and self-interest; for Locke, morality, unlike natural philosophy, is universal,

¹ On science and civility, see Shapin, *Social History*, esp. pp. 114–16.

demonstrable, and divine. Descartes thought he had proved the existence of an incorporeal, separable, and like immortal soul (AT 7, p. 78; CSM 2, p. 54). Locke appeared to reject, or at least to have serious doubts, about the existence of such an object (E IV. iii. 6). For Descartes, immortality implied the persistence of non-imagistic ‘intellectual memory’ alone (AT 3, p. 599; CSMK 216); for Locke, immortality implied the restoration of all of one’s memories for events in life. Descartes devolved several interesting proofs of the existence of God from the innate idea of God (AT 7, pp. 40–51); Locke denied the existence of all innate ideas, including the idea of God (I. iv. 8). Descartes thought that knowledge worth seeking was not acquired via sense experience; Locke found sense experience and reflection upon it to be the basis of all our useful knowledge. Their views on the will, powers, and causality differed significantly. Leibniz surely had it right when, in the *New Essays*, he typed Locke as ‘pretty much in agreement with M. Gassendi’ (*New Essays*, VI. vi. 70), Descartes’s fiercest and most capable philosophical antagonist.

In a celebrated essay, Richard Ashcraft argued that Locke’s religious commitments both ‘underlie and vitiate’, as Michael Ayers summarized the charge, his general epistemology. Ayers sought to relieve Locke of this charge, and one of my aims is to revisit this controversy. I agree with Ashcraft that Locke needed the Christian religion to be true while at the same time his epistemology pulled him towards religious scepticism and that this set up a profound conflict especially noticeable in the *Essay*. But I agree with Ayers that there is a certain consistency in Locke’s epistemology, and I try to bring this out by pointing to the theme of nescience in moral matters that accompanies Locke’s minimalistic acceptance of Christianity. The corresponding tension in Descartes is between his constant invocation of God as a transcendental entity juxtaposed against the evident replaceability of the term ‘God’ with the term ‘Nature’. The immutability, inscrutability, and implacability of God in his system implies a certain helplessness in human beings, so that there is a form of ‘Cartesian humility’, different from ‘Lockean humility’, but equally interesting for the commentator.

To develop these points, I’ll begin with a brief review of the basic theological posits of both philosophers.

1

The Cartesian God as a minimalist object playing a supporting role in the articulation of a scientific worldview has been discussed so extensively that I do not need to go into it very far. Suffice it to say that Cartesian theology embraces four principal points, two concerned with creative power, two concerned with benevolence:

God is the author of the eternal truths (AT 1, p. 145; CSMK 23).

God is the author of nature, i.e. creator of matter and the efficacious legislator of the laws of nature and the ground of causality (AT 11, pp. 32–5; CSM 1, pp. 90–1).

God is the guarantor of human bio-medical capability, though not infallibility (AT 7, pp. 82–3; CSM 2, pp. 56–8).

God is the guarantor of human epistemic competence, though not infallibility (AT 7, p. 54; CSM 2, pp. 37–8).

The power and intelligence of God are displayed in his (one is tempted to say here ‘its’) originating powers and in the laws of nature, but God’s goodness can be appreciated only in the adaptation of the animal body and its sensory systems to life and in the accessibility on the part of the human mind to world-transforming, as opposed to survival-related, knowledge, through controlled rational conjecture, observation, and modelling. Positive or revealed theology does not readily attach to this minimal version, which excludes miracles, can make no real sense of transubstantiation or the Trinity, and whose account of generation leaves no room for Original Sin and its transmission.²

Descartes’s theology is relatively straightforward and coherent. There is room for philosophical debate about whether the three arguments for the existence of God in Meditation 3, not to mention the recasting of the ontological argument in 5, are any good, or any good in the context in which they appear. There is also room for debate about whether Descartes is an occasionalist or continuous creationist, insofar as evidence seems to exist on both sides. There is further room for debate over whether God’s voluntaristic creation of the eternal truths is compatible with the epistemic realism Descartes seems to espouse and with the dependability of human logic and inference. Could an evil demon controlling a purely material universe induce in Descartes, if not the mistaken intuition of his existence, at any rate all the later reasonings of the *Meditations*, thereby deceiving him profoundly? But—fine points aside—the picture hangs together very well.

Descartes’s separation of theology from the Christian revelation and Christian sensibility as well as his ‘Mechanick Theist’ cosmology and theory of nature was responsible for the repudiation of Cartesianism by the English philosophers Henry More and Ralph Cudworth.³ Newton’s enthusiastic defence of God as Creator and Designer, as the foundation of universal attraction, and as a person in the General Scholium of his *Principia* was as significant an instance of English anti-Cartesianism as his repudiation of vortices and hypotheses.⁴ For Descartes, the supposition that the world had fallen into its present state through the operations of time and chance (AT 8A, pp. 102–3; CSM 1, pp. 257–8) was entirely coherent and informative, though contrary to Scripture; he exhibited no serious interest in the afterlife, the big promise of Christian revelation. His proof of the distinctness of mind and body was, he insisted, the answer to the challenge presented by the Fifth Lateran Council to philosophers to refute the claim of the soul’s mortality (AT 7, p. 3; CSM 2, p. 4). But disembodied minds cannot, according

² Nadler, ‘Arnauld, Descartes, and Transubstantiation’.

³ Sailor, ‘Cudworth and Descartes’.

⁴ On the metaphysical physics of the two, see Janiak, ‘Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy’.

to the well-articulated details of his robustly causal theory of perception, have experiences, unless God is a deceiver. Further, insofar as experiences are for preserving biological life, they would have no purpose in heaven.

2

Locke's broad conception seems in turn to acknowledge four roles for God:

God is the all powerful creator of the universe (E IV. x. 5).

God is responsible for the putative superaddition of thought to matter (E IV. x. 10).

Although God is not involved in any acts of perception, God is the author of human beings considered as understanding, rational, dutiful (E IV. iii. 18), and perceptual beings.

God sees into the heart and delivers ultimate justice (E II. xxvii. 22).

In the *Essay*, Locke divided his discussion of God into a section on our idea of God and a section on the existence of God. But rather than invoking causal processes originating with an existing God, as Descartes did in Meditation 3 to explain the occurrence of an idea of God, Locke explained the idea of God as a mental construction. In Draft A of the *Essay*, he seemed to echo Gassendi in the Fifth set of Objections, whose criticism of Descartes's theology ran as follows:

First, Gassendi asked whether Descartes's ascription of the properties of being 'supreme, eternal, infinite, omnipotent and the creator of all things' to his idea of (a so far unproved) God was not simply the product of the tradition. 'Do you not take this from your previously conceived knowledge of God, that is from having heard these attributes ascribed to him? If you had not previously heard anything of this sort would you still describe God in this way?' (AT 7, p. 286; CSM 2, p. 199).

Next, Gassendi questioned whether Descartes could really conceive of an infinite thing and he proposed that the idea of God was constructed by the 'amplification' of 'things we commonly admire in ourselves', such as longevity, power, knowledge, goodness, and blessedness (AT 7, p. 287; CSM 2, p. 200). '[T]ell me in good faith,' he continued a few pages later, 'whether you do not in fact derive all the language which you use of God from the human society in which you live... [A]lthough these ideas do not come from you alone, it seems they do not therefore come from God, but that they come from another source' (AT 7, p. 295; CSM 2, p. 205).

In Draft A of the *Essay*, Locke followed Gassendi in supposing,

[E]ven the best notions or Idea we can have of god is but attributeing the same simple Ideas of thinkeing, knowing willing existence without beginning & all those powers and operations we finde in ourselves... & conceive to have more perfection in them then [*sic*] would be in their absence, to him in an higher & unlimited degree. (Draft A, #2, 10)

But Gassendi's stunning proposal to Descartes—that the idea of God may be a social construction, even a myth or folktale—was conspicuously not advanced by Locke.

In Draft A, by contrast, Locke went on to say, rather startlingly, that ‘the being of a God may be made out more clearly & with greater assurance than of anything even immediately observable by our senses.’ The topic, he promised, would be discussed later ‘when I come to treat of things themselves & not of the ways & limits of our understanding’ (Draft A, #38, 66).

The admission that we have no positive idea of infinity—that it is simply extension or number considered without limits—will not at all, Locke continued, ‘destroy that way by which I suppose we can attain all the knowledge our narrow understandings can arrive to’.

Nor have we any reason from the narrowness of our own thoughts to doubt of the Existence of the great god or first aeternall cause because our dim understandings cannot discover his incomprehensible way of being. This were to deny the existence of anything that were too big for our pygmy graspe & boldly to expect althings should be made proportionably to our span.
(Draft A, #45, 82)

This is quite a statement, insofar as the moderation of epistemological pretensions seems to be precisely the point of Locke’s endeavour, in Drafts A, B, and C and in the finished *Essay*. Here Locke twisted his usual point rather hard: it is epistemological pretension to declare that we *must* restrict our knowledge to what is proportional to our powers. No such reasoning is applied to the mystery of the incorporeal soul.

The same pattern of separation between the discussion of the constructed idea of God and the presentation of arguments for the existence of God appears in the important chapter II. xxiii of the *Essay*, where Locke first proposed that the ‘idea’ of God is arrived at by a Gassendi-type process of mental concretion of qualities:

[I]f we examine the *Idea* we have of the incomprehensible supreme Being, we shall find, that we come by it the same way; and that the complex *Ideas* we have both of God and separate Spirits are made of the simple *Ideas* we receive from *Reflection*; v.g. having, from what we experiment in our selves, got the *Ideas* of Existence and Duration; of Knowledge and Power; of Pleasure and Happiness; and of several other Qualities and Powers, which it is better to have than to be without; when we would frame an *Idea* the most suitable we can to the supreme Being, we enlarge every one of these with our *Idea* of Infinity; and so putting them together, make our complex *Idea of God*. For that the mind has such a power of enlarging some of its *Ideas*, received from Sensation and Reflection, has been already shewed. (E II. xxiii. 33)

But the fact of the existence of God is derived by what Locke claimed to be a logically inescapable inference. God is the necessary condition of there being thought and knowledge. Something eternal must have produced what there is, and this something eternal cannot be matter, or ‘incogitative matter’, insofar as incogitative matter cannot produce thought. ‘I appeal to every one’s own thoughts, whether he cannot as easily conceive matter produced by nothing, as thought to be produced by pure matter, when before there was no such thing as thought, or an intelligent being existing?’ (E IV. x. 10.)

This move enabled Locke, following Gassendi, to reject the Cartesian incorporeal soul.⁵ Thought and knowledge would be impossible in a purely corporeal universe; but, given God, who can superadd the power of thought to organized matter, everything but God may be purely corporeal, an inference Locke appeared to welcome though never explicitly to endorse.

Proof of the existence of this God—a minimal God—has no intrinsic moral importance, at least not any importance that can be demonstrated so easily by philosophy. The God who punishes and rewards is an idea, an idea constructed, a Gassendist might argue, by extrapolating from our worldly experience of punishment and reward and by supposing a being able to carry out what escapes the power and reach of human beings. Yet Locke—because his naturalism acknowledged the power of human desires and the very limited human ability to foresee the future and to care about it (E II. xxi. 34–5) needed to recognize a God with these powers. Also, to escape the moral relativism that would seem to follow from his doctrine of experience, he needed a legislator. Descartes did not feel himself to be under any such pressure.

3

For Descartes, as noted, God scarcely qualified as a person, let alone as a judge or a punitive enforcer.⁶ Descartes seemed to endorse the notion that God lays down the law, not only to corpuscles but to human beings as well, at the start of Part 2 of the *Discourse* when he declared that ‘peoples who have grown gradually from a half-savage to a civilized state, and have made their laws only insofar as they were forced to by the inconvenience of crimes and quarrels, could not be so well governed as those who from the beginning of their society have observed the basic laws laid down by some wise law-giver. Similarly, it is quite certain that the constitution of the true religion, whose articles have been made by God alone, must be incomparably better ordered than all the others’ (AT 6, pp. 12–13; CSM 1, pp. 116–17). However, in its context, the passage seems to be a plea for the familiar Cartesian intellectual autocracy rather than for obedience to the one true religion.

In any case, Descartes’s ethics are conspicuously cut off from divine command. He is pragmatic, thus also a relativist, and, like Locke in this regard, a proponent of religious toleration.⁷ His moral ideal appears to conform to Pierre Charron’s ideal of ‘full and universal freedom of the mind’, described by E. H. Rice as a feature of late Renaissance scepticism.

⁵ Not everyone agrees, but see Wilson, ‘Managing Expectations’, and Jolley, *Locke’s Touchy Subjects*, esp. pp. 67–83.

⁶ God’s intelligence, power, and veracity lent themselves to a naturalistic interpretation as Spinoza realized; see the comments by Leibniz in Section 5.

⁷ Gillespie, ‘Descartes and the Question of Toleration’.

This freedom consists in a liberty to judge all things, to be bound by none of them, and to remain universally receptive to every point of view. It is a purely internal and ‘secret’ freedom which does not involve one’s external behaviour in the world. On the contrary, one should conform details of dress, behaviour, and usage to the laws, customs, and ceremonies of the country in which one lives.⁸

The ‘provisional morality’ of the *Discourse*—outward conformity in inessentials to ensure complete psychological freedom where it matters—is a direct evocation of Charron. Recall Descartes’s first resolution:

...to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions—the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live.

(AT 6, pp. 23–4; CSM 1, p. 122)

Positive ethics is simply control of excessive passion for one’s own good and that of others, not the aspiration towards Christian ideals of sinlessness. The aim, one might say, is to be able to proceed through life and to conduct one’s studies without being interfered with and without making unnecessary difficulties for oneself.

Locke’s theory of morals,⁹ by contrast with Descartes’s, reflects his view of God as a person with moral concerns, as the very foundation of human morality. His conviction that there were no innate, universal practical principles left Locke out on a limb, threatening the conclusion Descartes by and large accepted: morality is whatever your society says is moral and rewards you rather than punishing you for. Pagan morality, Locke was persuaded, was deeply inadequate: the Greeks and Romans, knowledgeable and sophisticated in so many respects, were people who exposed their children (*Reasonableness*, 196–8; cf. E I. iii. 9). Locke knew of no other religion besides Christianity (perhaps he was right) that prescribes tenderness towards children and some modicum of respect for women, at least as mothers. It was these virtues that he noticed were regularly disregarded, especially by the ‘savages’ who he thought took a distinctly utilitarian perspective on sex and food.

As Richard Aaron remarks, however, ‘It is in vain that we search in [Locke’s] pages for a consistent ethical theory’¹⁰—relating moral law to natural law, to divine will and to our motives. And as Ashcraft emphasizes, Locke’s convictions about the one true morality and the assured destiny of those who obey and who do not obey is at odds with his constant emphasis on human ignorance. Locke tried at one point in the *Essay* precisely to differentiate moral knowledge, which could be secured, from our knowledge of substances, which could not, arguing that because moral notions are mixed modes and made by the mind, we can grasp their entailment relations (E III. xi. 17; IV. iii. 18). This attempt was abortive and his fallback position was that morality is what the New

⁸ Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, 188.

⁹ For overviews see Sheridan, ‘Locke’s Moral Philosophy’, earlier Colman, *John Locke’s Moral Philosophy*.

¹⁰ Aaron, *John Locke*, 266–7.

Testament enjoins. Locke could escape from the incorporeal soul and innate ideas, but he had no choice but to attend to the specifically Christian revelation and its foundation in testimony regarding miracles. Thus faith, a faculty unrelated to the experience and reflection supposed in the *Essay* to be the basis of all knowledge, had to enter the epistemological picture. At the same time, Locke's meticulous attention to scriptural issues and his appeals to faith can obscure the point that Christianity supplies for him only a minimal morality and that it is the force of the *idea* of God, not the actions of God in another world, that actually sustains or ought to sustain human morality.

4

In another respect as well, there is more consistency in Locke than one might at first suppose. The two realms of theoretical and practical knowledge are analogous. As well as being essentially baffled by nature, unable to penetrate to real essences, unable to understand the generation of qualities, helpless in the face of the complexity and interdependence of things, we are morally ignorant and impaired.

'Tis not requisite on this occasion, for the inhancing of this benefit, to enlarge on the frailty of our Minds, and weakness of our Constitutions; How liable to mistakes, how apt to go astray, and how easily to be turned out of the paths of Virtue. If any one needs go beyond himself, and the testimony of his own Conscience in this point; If he feels not his own errors and passions always tempting, and often prevailing, against the strict Rules of his Duty; He need but look abroad into any Age of the World to be convinced. (*Reasonableness*, 290)

In the presentation of the *Reasonableness of Christianity* as well as in the *Essay*, human beings are irremediably 'mediocre'—emotional, incompletely rational, partially blind—and they face a confusing world of hidden causes and hidden effects. There are only a few known laws, in physics and in morality, and they don't explain or cover much. Only love to God and charity to ourselves (an interesting notion) are absolutely necessary moral requirements (LC 1, p. 556). When Denis Grenville, an overly scrupulous, morally obsessive man, wrote to Locke in 1678 for assurance that his moral strivings were sufficient, Locke replied, expressing a view of moral knowledge that is parallel to rather than opposed to the main themes of the later *Essay*. We cannot see into the essences of our actions or predict their remote consequences; nor can we imaginatively encompass all the alternatives to them.

Our short sight not penetrating far enough into any action to be able to discover all that is comparatively good or bad in it: Besides that the extent of our thoughts is not able to reach all those actions which at any one time we are capeable of doing... we cannot secure ourselves from being in the wrong. (LC 1, p. 557)

As Locke later described God as having adapted our sense organs to our ordinary mode of life, though not to the underlying structure of things, here he suggested that God has adapted our desires to his expectations. 'I cannot imagine how God who has

compassion on our weaknesse and knows how we are made, would put pore man nay the best of men, those that seeke him with sincerity and truth under almost an absolute necessity of sinning perpetually against him' (LC 1, p. 557). He told Grenville,

I confesse our duty is sometimes soe evident, and the rule and circumstances soe determin it to the present performance, that there is no latitude left. . . . But I think this seldome happens. At least I may confidently say it does not in the greatest part of the actions of our lives wherein I think god out of his infinite goodnesse considering our ignorance and frailty hath left us a great liberty. (LC 1, p. 557)

The contrast between human justice, which works with crude criteria of identity and responsibility, and divine justice which employs finer ones, seems to assure the reader that God will punish people in the hereafter for actions that escaped punishment in the world, including forgotten ones and those performed in a state of absent-mindedness. Yet Locke's aim was originally—before the issue of 'culpable drunkenness' was raised by Molyneux—to establish that 'no one shall be made to answer for what he knows nothing of' (E II. xxvii. 22).

The merciful disposition of God is a point reinforced in Locke's first Letter on Toleration and in the *Reasonableness* in which he asserts that Christ

did not expect . . . a Perfect Obedience void of all slips and falls: He knew our Make, and the weakness of our Constitutions too well, and was sent with a Supply for that Defect. Besides, perfect Obedience was the Righteousness of the Law of Works; and then the Reward would be of Debt, and not of Grace; And to such there was no need of Faith to be imputed to them for Righteousness. (*Reasonableness*, 213)

Such views were anticipated and shared by the softer wing of Anglican theology and by the Puritan Richard Baxter, as well as by the 'Latitude-Men'. Henry Hammond's *A paraphrase and annotations upon all the books of the New Testament briefly explaining all the difficult places thereof* of 1659, the first full-length commentary, anticipated Locke's doctrine of the proportionality of our perceptions and moral capabilities to the life-world and of the contingency of perfection as depending on grace and inachievable by man on his own.¹¹ Even Edward Stillingfleet, who strenuously objected to all traces of Epicurean corporealism and hedonism in Locke, admitted moral fallibilism.¹²

¹¹ '[T]he Illuminations ordinarily afforded by God are proportioned not to his all-seeing knowledge, but to our capacities, and our real wants, and so, as his Sanctifying grace is not given in such a degree, or manner, as to preserve us impeccable, so neither his Illuminations, as to render us inerrable or infallible.' So, Hammond concluded, 'where God affords not his grace, he requires not of us those performances to which that grace was necessary, and so . . . he will supply by his pardon what was wanting in our strength . . . and . . . will pardon errors of weakness as well as sins of weakness, humane nesciencies, as wel as humane frailties . . .' (*A paraphrase*, 10).

¹² In discussing exaggerated righteousness, Stillingfleet declared it an error not to 'Make allowance for the common Infirmities of Mankind; which do not only consist in the Imperfections of good Actions, but in such Failings, which human Nature is subject to in this State; notwithstanding our greatest Care to avoid them We must in judging others make allowance for the Weakness of Judgment and Strength of Passion, which we find often accompanied with a real Tenderness of Conscience The best use we can make of this, is, to pity the Infirmities of Mankind, and of those most, who are under the Conduct of

5

A corresponding notion of ‘Cartesian humility’ might seem difficult to coax from Descartes’s texts. Descartes emphasized rather the epistemic qualifications he possessed through having been made in God’s image (AT 7, p. 51; CSM 2, p. 35). The power of the human will is said by the Meditator to be ‘so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God’ (AT 7, p. 58; CSM 2, p. 40). True, Descartes admits that memory, imagination, and understanding are all ‘weak and limited’, and the at times overweening pretension of the *Principles* is qualified by the point that ‘our mental capacity is very mediocre’ (AT 9A, p. 80; CSM 1, p. 248). But the point he is trying to make in this connection is that we cannot know that ‘God made everything for our benefit’ (AT 9A, pp. 80–1; 248) and that readers should not dismiss the Cartesian account of the origins of the world because they think they know otherwise about the Creation. As in Locke’s flotation of the notion of ‘thinking matter’ (E IV. iii. 6) nescience can be a Trojan horse.

In Cartesian ethics, the emphasis is not on the frailty of human nature, the weakness of the will, and the responses to it of a just but forgiving God, but rather on God’s utter implacability. In the ‘Conversation with Burman’ (1648), Descartes referred to God’s ‘indifference’, and to the futility of prayer: ‘God is... quite unalterable, and... has agreed from eternity either to grant me a particular request or not to grant it...’ (AT 5, p. 167; CSMK 348). He went further in suggesting that we cannot either venerate nor scorn God, but only love him. ‘Veneration or respect’, he pointed out, ‘is an inclination of the soul not only to have esteem for the object that it reveres but also to submit to it with some fear in order to try to gain its favour.’

Accordingly we have veneration only for free causes which we judge capable of doing us good or evil, without our knowing which they will do. For we have love and devotion rather than simple veneration for those causes from which we expect only good, and we have hatred for those from which we expect only evil. And if we do not judge the cause of this good or evil to be free, we do not submit to it in order to try to gain its favour. Thus, when the pagans had veneration for woods, springs, or mountains, it was not strictly speaking these dead things that they revered, but the divinities which they believed to preside over them.

(AT 11, pp. 454–5; CSM 1, p. 388)

We cannot venerate God, nor can we fear God, because God is not a free cause. To consider God as capable of doing us harm or favours, as interested to gratify or chastise us, is to think as the pagans do.¹³ But we can love God and we can, Descartes thinks,

a mis-guided Conscience, because whatever the Action be their Design and Intention is honest and good.’ *Thirteen sermons*, 513.

¹³ The characterization of God as other than a ‘free cause’ might raise a question as to its consistency with Descartes’s alleged extreme voluntarism, allegedly manifested in his claim that God is the author of the eternal truths (AT 1, p. 149). But it is also the case that for Descartes, once God has ordained something, he does not waver and all events flow from God’s initial act of will. The fatalistic tenor of his philosophy was

accept everything that happens to us in a good frame of mind. We can derive joy ‘from everything’ when we realize that sorrows as well as joys, pains as well as pleasures, come from God, that is to say from the infinite power and rationality that God/Nature is, from seeing ourselves as part of this system, its laws working on us as through us. The doctrine of which Descartes was so proud—that God is the author of all the laws, moral, physical, and logical, including the eternal truths—is a statement of their inexorability. Here Descartes echoed the Stoic Justus Lipsius, an author well known to him:

We must acknowledge him to be stayed, resolute and immutable, alwaies one, and like himselfe, not wauering or varying in those things which once he willed and foresawe. For, The eternall God neuer chaungeth his minde, saith Homer. Which if thou con|fesse to bee true (as needes thou must, if there be in thee any reason or sense) this also must be allowed that all Gods decrees are firme and immooeable euen from euerlasting vnto all eternitie: of this groweth necessitie, and that same DESTINIE which thou deridest.¹⁴

We cannot see the whole or fully appreciate the ‘vastness, beauty, and perfection’ of the universe (AT 9B, p. 80; CSM 1, p. 248). In a letter to Chanut of 1647, Descartes retreated from the scientific and metaphysical presumptions of the *Meditations* and the *Principles* to an ethical modesty:

We must weigh our smallness against the greatness of the created universe, observing how all created things depend on God, and regarding them in a manner proper to his omnipotence... If a man meditates on these things and understands them properly, he is filled with extreme joy. Far from being so injurious and ungrateful to God as to want to take his place, he thinks that the knowledge with which God has honoured him is enough to make his life worthwhile.

(AT 4, p. 609; CSMK 309)

The wise man,

because he know that nothing can befall him which God has not decreed,...no longer fears death, pain, or disgrace. He so loves this divine decree, deems it as just and so necessary, and knows that he must be so completely subject to it that even when he expects it to bring death or some other evil, he would not will to change it even if—per impossibile—, he could do so. He does not shun evils and afflictions, because they come to him from divine providence; still less does he eschew the permissible goods or pleasures he may enjoy in life, since they too come from God. He accepts them with joy, without any fear of evils, and his love makes him perfectly happy. (AT 4, p. 610; CSMK 310)

not only identified by Leibniz, and carried further by Spinoza, it is backed up by certain remarks in the Correspondence with Elisabeth, where Descartes claims that even his own thoughts are foreseen and desired by God (AT 4, p. 314).

¹⁴ Lipsius, *Of Constancie*, 42. This is a form of ‘soft’ Stoicism by contrast with the rather ‘hard’ Stoicism of Epictetus. It recalls the aestheticism and detachment of Marcus Aurelius, a figure barely known before 1650. The lawfulness of nature extends to the human realm and has its own beauty: For Marcus, ‘Everything that happens is as customary and understandable as the rose in springtime or the fruit in summer. The same is true of disease, death, slander, and conspiracy, and all the things which delight or pain foolish men’ (*Meditations*, 34).

We grasp that all changes and motions come from God, the source of the eternal truths upon which everything else depends. So it is with events as Hippocrates said of diseases—all are natural, all are divine.¹⁵ Disease, for Descartes, is simply an element of the divinely established order. ‘Even when we are ill, nature still remains the same’ (AT 5, p. 179; CSMK 354); and ‘a sick man is no less one of God’s creatures than a healthy one, and it seems no less a contradiction to suppose that he has received from God a nature which deceives him’ (AT 7, p. 84; CSM 2, p. 58).

Leibniz purported to be exasperated by the combination in Descartes of determinism and voluntarism. Determinism for Leibniz was morally and intellectually acceptable only if one could have ethical confidence in the world, in which case its goodness had to consist in more than God’s decision to create it as he did. In a Letter to Molanus of c.1679, he complained that ‘A God like Descartes’s allows us no consolation other than that of patience through strength... [E]ach creature will be happy or unhappy depending on how it finds itself engulfed in these great currents or vortices. Descartes has good reason to recommend, instead of felicity, patience without hope’ (Gerhardt, ed. 4, p. 297–303; Ariew and Garber, trans. 242).

6. Conclusion

For all the evident differences between them, not only in the epistemological sphere, but in their theologies and moral stances, the ‘essential religiosity’, as distinct from formal theology, of both Descartes and Locke is associated with the notions of forgiveness and non-judgementalism. The authoritarianism, censoriousness, and scrupulosity of the old-style theologian are absent from their writings. There is enhanced psychological and anthropological realism, especially in their treatments of the passions.

Descartes’s attitude of acceptance towards all that befalls us followed from his conception of the universe as a law-governed realm, manifesting God’s impersonal wisdom and power. Contrary to the accusations of Leibniz, and the extrapolations made by Spinoza, the world for Descartes is good as opposed to ethically neutral. The human emotional system, like the human perceptual system, is adapted to the world. This adaptation can be seen as a provision of nature, perhaps the effect of the long history of the universe and the succession of conditions realized under the operations of the laws of nature. Or it can be seen as a divine provision, reflecting God’s goodness and concern for living and thinking beings. In either case, we are healthiest when we live according to nature, that is when we ‘live and eat like the animals... i.e. as much as we enjoy and relish, but no more’ (AT 5, p. 178; CSMK 353).

A pathos is defined by the Stoic Zeno as ‘an agitation of the soul alien from right reason and contrary to nature’.¹⁶ This is entirely wrong, according to Descartes. Because they failed to understand the physiological basis, usefulness, and pleasurable quality of

¹⁵ In connection with epilepsy, the ‘divine disease’. *Hippocrates*, 2.139–83.

¹⁶ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4. 6. 11.

the passions, the Stoics propounded untenable views about *apatheia* and self-control (AT 11, p. 327; CSM 1, p. 328). An emotion is simply a response to a surprise, and, as mind–body unities we are mostly unprepared for the ‘contingencies of life’. ‘[T]he objects of the passions produce movements in the blood which follow so rapidly from the mere impressions formed in the brain and the disposition of the organs, without any help at all from the soul, that no amount of human wisdom is capable of counter-acting these movements when we are not adequately prepared to do so’ (AT 11, p. 486; CSM 1, p. 403). The conclusion to the *Passions of the Soul* is that one ought to manage the passions with such skill that ‘the evils they cause are quite bearable and even become a source of joy’ (AT 11, p. 488; CSM 1, p. 404). The quasi-divine powers of the human will cannot be recruited to this end; they are restricted by Descartes to intramental operations, especially drawing inferences.

Locke, too, emphasizes, rather daringly, the power of our natural desires. The will is never moved to action except by ‘uneasiness’ (E II. xxi. 31–40). For Locke, ‘We are liable to forms of “extreme disturbance” that ‘possess our whole Mind, as when the pain of the Rack, an impetuous *uneasiness*, as of Love, Anger, or any other violent Passion, running away with us, allows us not to liberty of thought, and we are not Masters enough of our own Minds to consider thoroughly, and examine fairly’ (E II. xxi. 53). His belief that God is merciful with respect to human weakness and our tendency to stumble and blunder follows from his sense of the complexity of nature and human affairs and the mediocrity of human reason. Although his advocacy for religious toleration does not extend as far as Descartes’s and indeed excludes Descartes’s view of morality as convention, his anthropological realism and his attempt to lighten the sense of sin associated with the passions is as impressive as Descartes’s.

The moral shift in the following century, from a concern with the depravity of individuals and the distortion of their proper relationship to God to a concern with the corruption of social institutions and practices and the distortion of proper relationship between human and human, is a complex story. Both Descartes’s presentation of the human being as caught up rather helplessly in nature, but as enjoying the power to understand it and thereby to control it by ‘reason’, and Locke’s presentation of human beings as victims of their desires and their ignorance—but, for all that, as eminently educable, and as makers of their concepts and institutions—had a part to play.

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